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AUTHOR Katz, Lilian G.
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ABSTRACT

The question of what children need for optimal development is discussed. The "principle of optimum effects" is seen as fundamental: good for children is only good for them in the "right" of optimum proportions. Seven propositions about the needs of children are advanced: (1) The young child has to have a deep sense of safety; (2) every child has to have adequate--not excessive--self esteem; (3) every child has to feel or experience his/her life as worth living, reasonably satisfying, interesting and authentic; (4) young children need adults or older children who help them make sense of their own experiences; (5) young children have to have adults who accept the authority that is theirs by virtue of their greater experience, knowledge and wisdom; (6) young children need optimum association with adults and older children who exemplify the personal qualities we want them to acquire; (7) children need relationships or experiences with adults who are willing to take a stand on what is worth doing, having, knowing and caring about. (Author/MS)

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The Young Child in Focus

Lilian G. Katz

Opening Address

National Conference of the Australian
Preschool Association

University of Melbourne
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THE YOUNG CHILD IN FOCUS

Lilian G. Katz, Ph.D.
Professor of Early Childhood Education
Director, ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education

I want to take the opportunity of this opening session to address the conference theme in a general way and to speak to those concerns we all share as parents, teachers, government officials, agency directors, public servants, tertiary educators and political leaders.

I hope you will keep it in mind that I speak to you from the perspective of experience in another country. The extent to which my remarks are appropriate to the Australian scene will have to be evaluated by each of you. My remarks here represent no official position; rather they are based on my own thinking and interpretation of the state-of-the-art of early childhood education and development.

I note that in the Australian Preschool Association's booklet Policy Statement on Children's Services eleven Association aims are listed (pp. 4-5), the first of which is "To promote the optimum development of the preschool child." I want to address this aim by recounting a recent experience with a group of young and zealous students who were discussing the reactions and impressions they had from working in day care centers. One young woman spoke of her experience in deeply disappointed tones. Among the complaints against the program she listed was that the director refused to let the children have small animals in the center environment. I listened appreciatively for a while to the righteous indignation only the young and inexperienced can enjoy. I then asked her as gently as I could: "Let's speculate! What do you think are the chances that a child can develop into optimum adulthood without having had animals to play with in the day care center?" After a few moments' thought

she indicated that the chances were fairly good. "What about finger paint? Block play? Can a child grow into normal adulthood without them in the day care center?" I asked. A lively discussion followed these questions, leading all of us to search for answers to the question, What does each child have to have for optimum development? I want here to share with you my own answers to this question by offering seven interrelated propositions. I hope these propositions will be helpful to you as you inspect your own answers to the question, What does each child have to have for optimum development?

The seven propositions below are built upon an assumed first principle which I have discussed on earlier visits, (Katz, 1976) namely, that whatever is good for children is only good for them in the "right" or optimum proportions. Another way of saying it is that just because something is good for children, more of it is not necessarily better for them. This "principle of optimum effects" applies to so many influences on childrens' environments that I have often referred to it as the "Law of Optimum Effects." Among the many examples are: attention, affection, stimulation, independence, novelty, choices of activities, etc. All of the latter can be thought to be "good" for children. But only in optimum amounts, frequencies or intensities..

Taking the first principle of optimum effects as fundamental, we can return to the question of what children have to have for optimum development.

Proposition One: The young child has to have a deep sense of safety. I am referring here to psychological safety, which we usually speak of as a sense of "security." But over the last twenty years or so the term "security" has come to be used as a cliche. By psychological safety I refer to the subjective feeling of being connected and attached to one or more others. Experiencing oneself as attached, connected - or safe - comes not just from being loved, but from feeling loved, feeling wanted, feeling significant, etc. to an optimum (not maximum) degree. Note that the emphasis here is more on feeling loved and wanted than on being loved and wanted.

As I understand early development, feeling strongly bonded or attached comes not from the warmth and kindness of caretakers alone. The feelings are a consequence of the child perceiving that what he (or she) does, or does not do, really matters to others--matters so much that they will pick him up, comfort him, get angry and even scold him. Safety, then, grows out of being able to trust people to respond not just warmly but really.

I suggest that this proposition applies to all children, whether they are wealthy or poor, at home or at school; whether they are handicapped or normal at whatever their ages until perhaps young adulthood.

Proposition Two: Every child has to have adequate - not excessive - self-esteem. At first glance this seems to be such a simple proposition. But a few comments are in order here.

It is useful to keep it in mind that one does not acquire self-esteem at a certain moment in childhood and then have it forever. Self-esteem is nurtured by and responsive to the significant others - adults, siblings and other children, throughout the growing years.

Even more important to remember here is that one cannot have self-esteem in a vacuum. Our self-esteem results from evaluations of ourselves against criteria. We evaluate ourselves as estimable against criteria which we acquire very early in life. We acquire them in our families, neighborhoods, ethnic groups and later on from peer groups and the larger community. Early in life these criteria against which we come to evaluate ourselves as acceptable, worthwhile--against which we judge or experience ourselves as loveable--vary from family to family. In some families beauty is a criterion; in others, neatness, or athletic ability or toughness are criteria. Consider that criteria like being dainty, or quiet, or talkative, or pious or well-mannered or academically precocious, etc. might constitute the criteria against which young children are judged loveable, worthy, and acceptable.

It is of course the right, if not the duty, of each family to establish what it considers to be the criteria against which esteem is accorded. The process and the patterns by which they are implemented are most likely unselfconscious in formulation as well as expression. One of our responsibilities as educators is to be sensitive to the family's own criteria. We may not agree with the family's definition of the "good boy" or the "good girl." But we would be very unwise to down-grade, undermine, or in other ways, violate the self-esteem criteria the children bring with them, even though we must help children acquire criteria which must serve to protect the welfare of the whole group in our care. I cannot think of any way in which it could help a child to have his respect for his family undermined.

I suggest that children have to have optimum self-esteem wherever they are, whether they are wealthy or poor, handicapped or normal throughout their growing years.

Proposition Three: Every child has to feel, or experience his/her life as worth living, reasonably satisfying, interesting and authentic.

I have in mind here the potential hazard inherent in modern industrialized societies of creating environments and experiences for young children which are superficial, phoney, shallow and trivial.

This proposition suggests that we involve children in activities, and interactions about activities, which are real to them, significant to them and intrigue them. It suggests also that we resist the temptation to settle just for what amuses them. I would suggest as a criterion for childrens' activities that they are useful if they give children opportunities to operate on their own experiences, to reconstruct their own environments and if they give us opportunities to help children to learn what meanings to assign to their experiences.

As I visit early childhood programs in both developed and developing countries, I am provoked to ponder whether people have taken our long-standing emphasis on warmth and kindness, acceptance and love to mean: Let's be nice to children. As I watch adults being nice and kind and gentle, I often speculate as to whether if I were a child in such a pleasant environment I would look at the adults and say to myself--everybody is kind and sweet, but inside them is there anybody home?*

It seems to me that children should be able to feel that their lives are real, authentic, worth living and satisfying whether they are at home, in schools or day care centers throughout their growing years.

Proposition Four: Young children need adults or older children who help them to make sense of their own experiences.

By the time we meet the young children in our care they have already acquired some understandings or constructions of their experiences. Their understandings or constructions may be incorrect or inaccurate although developmentally appropriate. As I see it, our major responsibility is to help the young to improve, extend, refine, develop and deepen their own understandings or constructions of their own worlds. As they grow older and reach primary school age we may help them with their understandings of other peoples' worlds. Indeed, increasing refinement and deepening of understandings is a life-long process.

What do young children need or want to make sense of? Certainly people, what they do, what they will do next, how they feel; how things around them are made and how they work; how they themselves, and other living things grow; where people and things come from, and so forth. The list is endless.

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*This theme is developed more fully in the Alice Creswick Memorial Lecture.

If we are to help young children to improve and develop their understandings of their experiences we must uncover what those understandings are. The uncovering that we do, or that occurs as children engage in the activities we provide, helps us to make good decisions about what to cover, or what subsequent activities to plan.

Youngsters need help in making sense of their experiences wherever they are: at home or in programs, whatever their backgrounds, and throughout their growing years.

Proposition Five: Young children have to have adults who accept the authority that is theirs by virtue of their greater experience, knowledge and wisdom.

This proposition is based on the assumption that neither as parents or as educators are we caught between the extremes of authoritarianism or permissiveness. Authoritarianism may be defined as the exercise of power without warmth, encouragement, or explanation. Permissiveness may be seen as the abdication of power but offers children warmth, encouragement and support as they seem to need it. I am suggesting that young children have to have, instead of these extremes, adults who are authoritative, i.e. adults who exercise their very considerable power over the lives of young children with warmth, support, encouragement and adequate explanations. The concept of authoritativeness also includes treating children with respect, i.e. treating their opinions, feelings, wishes, and ideas etc. as valid even when we disagree with them. To respect people we agree with is no great problem; respecting those whose ideas, wishes and feelings are different from ours may be a mark of wisdom in parents and genuine professionalism in teachers.

The combination of the exercise of optimum power and optimum warmth implied in authoritativeness is helpful for children wherever they are, whatever their background, throughout their youth.

Proposition Six: Young children need optimum association with adults and older children who exemplify the personal qualities we want them to acquire.

Make your own list of the qualities you want the young children in your care to acquire. There may be some differences among us. But it is likely that there are some qualities we all want all children to have, e.g. the capacity to care for and about others, honesty, kindness, acceptance of those who are different from themselves, the love of learning, and so forth.

This proposition suggests that we look around the childrens' environments and ask to what extent do our children have contact with people who exhibit these qualities? We might ask also: To what extent do our children observe people who are attractive and glamorous counter-examples of the qualities we want to foster? It seems to me that children need communities or societies which take the steps necessary in order to protect them from excessive exposure to violence and crime while their characters are still in formation.

The role and significance of adequate adult models seems valid for all children wherever they are, wherever they come from, throughout their developing years.

Proposition Seven: Children need relationships or experiences with adults who are willing to take a stand on what is worth doing, worth having, worth knowing, and worth caring about.

This proposition seems to belabor the obvious. But in an age of increasing emphasis on pluralism, multi-culturalism, and community participation, professionals are increasingly hesitant and apologetic about their own values. It seems to me that such hesitancy in taking a stand on what is worthwhile causes us to give our children unclear signals about what is expected and what is worth knowing and doing. When we do take a stand, it does not guarantee that our children will accept or agree with our version of the good life. Nor does

it imply that we reject others' versions of the good life. We must, in fact cultivate our capacities to respect alternative definitions of the worthwhile life. My point is that when we take a stand, with quiet conviction and courage, we help the young in that they can more easily see us as thinking and caring individuals who have enough self-respect to respect our own values as well as others'. I suggest that such thinking and caring adults are important to children wherever they are, wherever they come from, throughout development.

In summary, all seven propositions hang together on the central question to which the conference is addressed, namely to our responsibilities for the quality of the daily lives of all of our children - wherever they spend those days, throughout the long years of growth and development.

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